

*Choosing To Be The Minority*

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**By**

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Gary Pavlechko", is written over a horizontal line.

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## Abstract

Race has taken a major role in the history of the United States of America. It has been transformed and redefined by each generation, bringing a new set of characteristics to take into consideration. Race has played a large part in my life and has aided me in becoming the person I am today. In addition, gender has also taken a role in shaping my views of the world. From my diverse experiences I have come to the conclusion that choosing to put myself in situations where I question what social constructions mean, like race and gender, has led to my own astronomical growth and success. This paper outlines some of those experiences, along with historical and scientific research about race. I also write briefly about some of my experiences with gender, as they are innately intertwined with race.

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## **Choosing To Be The Minority**

### **By: Nicole Szoko**

In this text I will be talking about my experiences from childhood to present and research pertaining to race. I have included research to enhance my experiences in a scholarly context. My experiences may or may not reflect the experiences of others in similar or varying situations. It will be important to keep in mind that I use generalizations of White and Black, male and female culture, as well as other cultures, as I have experienced them. They are not applicable to every individual. In addition, I use the terms Black and White as blanket terms of race. People who fit in these categories have backgrounds from around the world. The specific cultures that each group embodies in the United States are what I am focused on. In one section I do compare my experience abroad to my experiences in the United States.

I am a twenty-one year old woman who is an undergraduate student at Ball State University. I am a Medallion Scholar, which means I am a part of a program where I have been able to create a major specifically catering to my goals as a student and professional. I created my major around the concepts of global humanitarianism and social justice. I am passionate about both. According to Dictionary.com, a humanitarian is a person who is actively engaged in promoting human welfare and reform. In other words, a humanitarian is another word for philanthropist. Merriam-Webster dictionary says that social justice is the "doctrine of egalitarianism," which is the belief that everyone is equal purely based on the fact that they are a human being. I am building my career around various fields that have a hand in humanitarianism and social justice

like education, sociology, political science, psychology, community health, and economics.

As a White woman I am not an overall racial minority, but as a woman I am a minority. Throughout my life and my college years I have experienced many interactions ranging from prejudice and bullying to love and friendship. All of my experiences have led to my current career path and academic goals. I believe the most impactful experiences in my life come from being a minority. Things like joining an all Black service fraternity, gaining many close Black friends and joining an African-American sorority have all brought my attention to racial struggles. The differences and similarities in culture, language, family, values, and struggles brought the meaning of race and its part in my life into perspective. Furthermore, I have experienced gender specific criticism and praise. From establishing my role as a leader to fighting for my right to claim my body as my own, gender has helped me determine who I am as an individual and as a woman.

The two types of minority statuses that have affected my life drastically are race and gender. Race is the categorization of human beings based on their physical appearance such as, skin color, eye color, or bone structure. In the United States, race is about numbers. There are more Whites than Blacks, Browns, or Yellows. People who are not White are a statistical minority, although that is rapidly changing. Gender, on the other hand, is not about numbers, but rather underrepresentation. Gender can be defined as a psychological construct, as opposed to a biological distinction between people referred to as sex (Crews 321). According to the 2010 Census, Women make up



over half of the U.S. population but do not hold half of the seats in congress and on average make ten thousand dollars less than men per year (United States 15).

Race and gender have been a hot topic in research for a long period of time. For years there has been a struggle between two points of view, dividing both scientists and social scientists. The two groups basically come down to essentialists and constructionists. Essentialists believe that race and gender are empirically verifiable differences that exist separately from any social process. The characteristics of such beliefs are internal, and are separate from interactions with other people or a person's environment (Bohan 8). Constructionists, on the other hand, believe that the social process is deeply involved in shaping differences. These social processes can include economic, legal, political, religious, and scientific associations. An example of the differing views is how essentialists view sexual orientation, while constructionists would say sexual preference. Orientation implies that one's sexuality is predetermined at birth. Preference suggests that one chooses one's own sexuality (Rosenblum 3). It is almost impossible to be exposed strictly to essentialist or constructionist viewpoints in a lifetime. The majority of people grow up practicing more essentialist views of the world and people. There is a smaller population of people who grow up learning that society constructs many of the roles and views that we have of people. Others are exposed to both points of view in various ways. Although, people do learn that differences in personality and other characteristics are constructed over a lifetime, things like race, gender, and sexuality are seen as more concrete in many societies (Rosenblum 3).

Over the course of time, social movements pendulate from essentialist to constructionist perspectives, trying to convince one another and the public of their

beliefs through both research and blind faith. Anti-Feminists in particular, and some feminists as well, believe that women and men are innately different from one another, embodying essentialist beliefs. Feminists today often hold more constructional beliefs that gender is defined by how someone is raised and what roles they choose to fulfill. The gay rights movement in the 1970s took a constructionist belief that one has a choice in sexual preference. Today, the gay rights movement supports more of the essentialist belief, where people are thought to be born into a certain sexual orientation, rather than constructionist belief of choosing to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Rosenblum 4).

My mother and father are more liberal and encouraged me to learn as much as I could about others and the world. In contrast, my extended family holds more traditionally conservative and essentialist beliefs. My parents believe that people should be able to achieve their dreams. My mother in particular preaches ideal results with an essentialist mindset. Oftentimes, she is blind to the constructions that society imposes on various groups. When I talk about subjects such as health care, my mother does not understand that the construction of race and social status in our society limits how people can provide for themselves. For example, in 2010, 27.4% of Black people were in poverty, while only 9.9% of non-Hispanic Whites were in poverty. On top of that, Black children are more likely to be living in poverty than any other race at 38.2% (United States 79). In her mind, being impoverished shouldn't stop someone from achieving their goals because there are resources available to aid people in doing so. The disconnect is that society has created a sort of social vacuum. Someone with a low socio-economic status more than likely does not know about the resources that are

available to him or her, or they simply do not have the means to access the resources. The education system, neighborhoods, job availability, and lack of positive role models can all contribute to creating a cycle of poverty that people have a hard time escaping (Daniel Tatum 4). For example, some people do not have access to the Internet and do not have the money or resources to use library computers. This can often deter people from gaining skills to be successful in school, or at work. It can also limit the resources that are available to them. Today, information is often dispersed digitally rather than with fliers or personal calls. This can make it difficult to stay abreast with what is new and desirable in an ever-evolving society. But being close to one another in communities and neighborhoods does offer some benefits when technology is not available. Some people have taken an essentialist viewpoint saying that someone who is Black and in poverty is there because what they are, referring to someone's skin color, determines where they fit into our society. The same goes for women, who through a more conservative point of view are only supposed to be mothers and care takers of house and home, as opposed to a working woman who earns a wage. These assumptions about race and gender have developed over the course of hundreds of years on all parts of the planet.

### *A Brief History of Race and Myself*

Before the Europeans discovered the "New World" made up of the Americas, race was a general term in the English language that meant kind or type. It had no specific meaning when it came to skin color or physical features. The English first used



it to refer to the Irish. The two nations struggled for 800 years, with a period of time where the Irish were under British colonial rule. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century the English saw the Irish as an unpleasant race. They were considered to be lazy, disorderly, impoverished, animalistic, drunkards, and in the case of immigrants, pollution to England (Martin 96). The English also saw the Irish as savages, disregarding any similarities they had, including complexion. The lack of effort to integrate Irish and English cultures for over eight centuries is a forecaster to the lack of integration between the English and their colonies in the New World.

As a majority of White Europeans traveled to the colonies, the immigrant assimilation paradigm came into effect. This is the notion that these fair skinned Europeans had access to the “freedom and opportunity of American life, achieving material success and enriching the country by their presence (Kraut 295).” These European immigrants created a sense of “normative whiteness,” demonstrating how they thought life should be lived. The people of the New World, Native Americans specifically, seemed to be even a step further into savagery and further away from civil society than the Irish in the eyes of the English (Kraut 296). English immigrants used the Native Americans and Africans for economic gain. In doing so, they justified their actions by “social identification and stratification that was seemingly grounded in the physical differences of populations...but whose real meaning rested in social and political studies (Rosenblum 43).” It is important to note that poor White Europeans and indentured servants were seen by upper class English as somewhat uncivilized in the seventeenth century, like the Irish. This group of light skinned immigrants needed to establish the difference between themselves, Black slaves, and Native Americans in

order to prove their “Americanness (Kolchin 155-156).” In the late eighteenth century upper class White people realized that if the poor White people, Africans, and Native Americans joined forces, their positions and wealth, would be compromised. To prevent this, society and the government, grouped poor Whites in with other Whites, eliminating the division of class as the determinant of privilege. As the rights of all White people grew, those of other groups decreased in order to keep the power structure intact (Rosenblum 43). Modern racial definitions were developed by the American culture and are imbedded into our belief systems and lives. Being American is directly linked with being White because that is how the upper class Whites kept their power and privilege (Rosenblum 17). One can notice that in the first one hundred years of European immigration, the power struggle was of European nature against people like the Native Americans. When immigrants were attempting to establish an American identity is when there was a transition from European to White. As stated before, this “new identity” created power for those with European heritage and light skin.

This power and privilege has carried its weight throughout my life. My elementary school on the east coast was a diverse environment. My closest circles of friends were of Western European, African, Korean, Spanish and Russian decent. We did not see much of a difference between each other. We had different complexions and cultures, but that created curiosity rather than strife. When I moved to the Midwest, White people surrounded me. My privilege weighed down on me as I came to the realization that being different was not a valuable trait if you wanted to be liked as a teenager. I found myself struggling in an attempt to break stereotypes like Black girls were faster runners than White girls. I was on a competitive travel basketball team that was automatically



intimidated by a team that was made of majority Black girls. When we played against a team that had girls who were Islamic they would assume that the girls were not good at playing basketball. When a boy transferred to our high school, people automatically thought that he would be the star of our basketball team because he was Black, which is another stereotype. Like in the case of the Muslim girls that we played basketball against, many stereotypes were made in regards to cultural distinctions of various races. For example, there are not many people who speak fluent Spanish in the Midwest if they are not of Latino or Spanish descent. I have spoken Spanish since I was six years old. It seems logical to many people to assume that my family is Latino because I learned the language at such a young age. These stereotypes limited people to assuming that I was Latina; they were unaware of programs that openly promote immersive learning language programs from a young age as opposed to strictly secondary school language courses. As a result, I began to develop a thicker skin when it came to dealing with people who were ignorant to diversity in general, attempting to become more understanding of their point of view without getting frustrated.

When I moved to college, I had to make a conscious effort to break down the barriers I had built after moving to the Midwest. Once again, I felt different from everyone else both academically and socially. I felt as if I were more driven to achieve the highest academic success possible and, at the same time, I wanted to be challenged and go above and beyond what is expected of students, unlike many of my friends. I struggled a lot in regards to finding my own identity through academia and friendship. My resident hall assistant convinced me to join her co-ed service fraternity, Alpha Phi Omega, about a month into my Freshman year. When I saw that I was the

only person who was White, it was a relief not to be a part of the White wash that I had gotten so used to. At the same time, I entered into an organization that was rich with a culture that I was unfamiliar with: Black culture. Some of my fraternity members, known as brothers regardless of one's gender, were grown adults who were about to enter the real world, and others were Freshman in the same position I was in. Throughout my first year, I did not really develop those friendships with my brothers out the fear of being different. Instead, I focused on the people who lived on my floor. They happened to be White and were familiar. I found that their friendship was the most detrimental that I had ever experienced.

In response to the detrimental relationships with my White friends in my first year, I chipped away at the barrier and created lifelong friendships with my fraternity members. One relationship in particular has helped me in understanding race. That is my relationship with my best friend, Kira Cole. She calls herself Black. Her heritage is Brazilian, African, Irish, and Portuguese. She was raised in a middle class home, with a loving mother and father. She is intelligent, athletic, confident, and someone that I would trust until my dying day. We constantly are talking about race and what it really means to us versus to the rest of the world. For me, the word Black is the absence of color, while White is a combination of all colors according to physics. Obviously, skin color does not work in the same way as light, it is actually more than just color. It is a label that encompasses culture, language, and traditions. The word Black does not necessarily refer to African descent, but rather the culture that came out of the areas where these people lived, struggled, loved, and prospered. I was raised in an area where the majority of people who were around me were White, and therefore I was

infused with typically White culture and beliefs. For example, recently someone told me that I fit into the Black community but I am not Black per se. This experience helped me to realize that appearances are not necessarily reflective of one's culture. A man being interviewed about White and Black people said, "Looks don't mean much. The things that make us different are how we think. What we believe is important, the ways we look at life (Rosenblum 50)."

### *It's a Culture Thing*

If someone asked me what White culture and beliefs are, I would not be able to really tell you but I would be able to say that they are different from Black culture and beliefs. There are no absolutes to Black or White culture, but there are consistencies that I have seen no matter where or what social class someone is brought up in. Culture can be defined as many different things but for the most part it is a mixture of human actions, assumptions, beliefs, customs, thoughts and values. All of these contribute to how we define how we live, socialize, define reality and pass down things from one generation to the next (Sue 56). Derald Wing Sue defines White European-American culture around nine main characteristics: rugged individualism, competitive spirit, standard English language, Christian monotheism, Protestant work ethic, European aesthetics, and ideal physical attractiveness of fair skin, blond hair, blue eyes, thin and youthful. These characteristics contribute to how the nation thinks about race, also called racialization (56). As stated before, White European-Americans thought that their culture was the most civilized, so they thought everyone should follow the same culture. The culture of slavery within the European-American people cultivated beliefs that



people who had darker skin, like Africans, Native Americans, and Asians, were inferior. Unfortunately, this monoculturalism persists in our society today, creating ethnocentric beliefs about cultures that are not European-American (Sue 57). For those who do not fit into the ideal European look, there is a pressure to attempt to conform. The same goes for how White parenting and Black parenting differ.

Social class is the major determinant when it comes to parenting but even within social classes there are racial differences in parenting (Cheadle 699). A study found that Black and Hispanic mothers experience more stress than White mothers who live in the same neighborhood when it comes to parenting. As a result, Black mothers tend to show more signs of depression at younger ages. Various researchers suggest that this depression leads to negative and intrusive parenting habits (Franco, Pottick and Huang 585). Another study by Aryn M. Dotterer at Purdue University suggests that although socialization and parenting practices of Black families are sometimes seen as harsh, it is more than likely a result of living in more dangerous neighborhoods. She also suggests that the interpretation of what is harsh is relative to who is defining harsh parenting practices (Dotterer 666).

In my family, and most of my White friends' families from high school, if we talk back we get scolded and maybe grounded. If my friends from college, who are mostly Black, spoke back, all hell would break loose and as most of them would say "they wished they had never opened their mouth." I have concluded that there is a broad generalization that Black people have a greater sense of respect, both demanded and earned, for their elders, compared to White people. I believe the source of this respect is from the so-called "harsh parenting practices" seen in many Black households. In

simplified terms for Black parents it is better that they are harsh at home to prepare their children, instead of throwing them into a harsh world unprepared.

Growing up my view of beauty was pretty close to the typical idea of White beauty. I thought that being skinny, with large breasts, and light eyes was the ideal beauty. Having a big butt or any other curves for that matter, are not appreciated but rather looked down upon. My first friends in college were White females. One in particular was extremely concerned with her weight and how she looked. It concerned me for a long time, and then began to rub off on me. I wondered if I was thin enough, and if I was beautiful. I could always be more muscular or lose fat in various places of my body. When I became closer to my Black friends in Alpha Phi Omega, I was brought to more of an awareness of different types of beauty. I found that in the Black community being really skinny is undesirable, and that having fat was not necessarily a bad thing. Having a round butt and thighs was attractive and if you have a stomach it is not the end of the world! In fact, the term "thick" is used to describe someone who has muscle and fat on their body. Being thick is desirable and attractive. Many White people describe those who do not fit into the thin, beautiful ideal as "chubby," as opposed to thick. My friends talk about how standard weights for various heights aren't really applicable to all Black men and women. They say that their body composition is different from that of Whites. Determining what a Black person should weigh cannot be compared to what a White person should weigh.

Research has told us that even though Black women have a heightened risk for obesity than White women, Black women are actually more satisfied with their bodies than White women (Chithambo and Huey 1). For White women weight is inversely



correlated to attractiveness; as one's weight increases, attractiveness decreases. How Black women determine their attractiveness is independent of their perceived weight (4). In addition, the average Black man prefers a woman with a heavier body weight than a White man, creating a broader sense of beauty in Black culture (1). Studies have found that low-income Black adolescents experience less dissatisfaction with their body compared to their White counterparts. This resilience can be contributed to living with racism every day, building emotional resilience to negative comments and a more broad definition of beauty. When entering into college it is known that cultural beliefs and values will be broadened or questioned for all types of students. Black women are challenged in ways that White women often aren't. For Black women at predominantly White institutions, self-esteem and racial identity are the determinants of beauty. Black woman who have low self-esteem and racial identity are "at greater risk for developing body image issues and eating disorders." When Black women attend predominately Black colleges there are fewer reports of eating disorder symptoms (Hesse-Biber, Livingston, and Ramirez 698).

Physical self-esteem is directly related to college students' racial identity. Important factors in determining self-esteem and worth include family racial identity, neighborhood, peer groups, school environment, and unique life events. The majority of the time Black women establish their concepts of body image prior to college, allowing for a more "broad range of ideal body types." The more women have a sense of Black pride and a heightened sense of racial identity, the more self-confidence and body image satisfaction they have. Women who identify as multi-racial or grew up in diverse

environments are more likely to be protected from being pressured by beauty ideals of various groups (Hesse-Biber, Livingston, and Ramirez 708).

### *What's in a name?*

I found it was hard for me to break down my own barriers, and those of others, if I felt like I had to watch what I said at every turn. How do I refer to my friends; as African American or Black? This brought up the question of how I identify myself: as European-American or White? How people identify themselves is extremely important in regards to how society views different groups of people. These categorizations are a way for us to separate those who are privileged and those who are not (Johnson 21). It is a way for us to organize a large number into smaller factions such as race.

How is African-American different than being Black? Many people who say they are White would not think twice about the label. Maybe they would call themselves Anglo or European-American. This is because being White holds privilege. People who are White are automatically seen as individuals and have an invisible sense of entitlement, whereas someone who is a racial minority might feel that categorizing themselves as Black or African-American takes away their individuality because of the social definition of being in those categories (Johnson 77-78). Furthermore, the issue is that names are involved in a "redefinition of self, an assertion of power, and a rejection of others' ability to impose an identity (Rosenblum 7)."

How Americans identify themselves in the United States dates back to the first census in the US in 1790. The first census included free White males, free White females, all other free persons and slaves. By 1840, the Census progressed minutely by

listing free White persons, free colored persons and slaves (Nobles 28). Prior to 1970, determination of race was left to the census taker to determine by looks. Starting in the 1970 Census, race of each family was identified by the head of the household and was primarily treated as self-identification. One could not be a part of more than one racial group (Rosenblum 10). It was not until the 2000 census when people were able to identify themselves as more than one race (Rosenblum 11).

The original name that White people used in reference to Black people was coloreds. This was seen as derogatory, so leading intellectuals such as W.E.B. Dubois, Martin Luther King Jr., and Booker T. Washington in the civil rights movement started using the term Negro. The term Black evolved in response to the powerful Negro movement. Black was correlated with being a colored person and was used continually for negative purposes at the time. Negro was the new wave of being an informed and independent person. The name brought people together, creating a powerful face for people who did not fit into the White mold, whether it is physically, culturally, or in regards to beliefs (Rosenblum 9).

Today, the use of the terms Black and African-American is a hot social topic. Over the years there has been a struggle in the Black community over what to be called as a group. In academia, African-American and Black are often used interchangeably, but there is an increasing number of the public who prefer to be called African-American rather than Black (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education 18). A poll conducted by Gallup, Inc. revealed that from 2000 to 2007 there was an increase of 5% of people who preferred to be called African American over Black. In the year 2007, 24% preferred to be called African American, 13% preferred Black and 61% said that it did not matter



(Newport 1). The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education explains that the choice to use the term Black in the journal title stems from multiple reasons. The first reason is that “many Black people engaged in higher education in the United States do not consider themselves African American.” There are Black students from Africa and the Caribbean who do not consider themselves as American, or even African when referring to the West Indies. People who are from Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia are African but generally do not fall into the category of Black. The journal also does not necessarily apply to White people who come from African nations such as Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education 19).

Ultimately, I have found in my personal experience that there is no correct answer when it comes to choosing between Black and African-American, or even White and European-American. Everyone has their own preference due to their knowledge of their heritage, or lack thereof, and their personal experiences. Throughout my life I have come to observe that being Black is not entirely a matter of skin color but how a person experiences being Black. To many of my friends being Black means being comfortable with whom you are in a society that tells us that being Black is not the ideal.

The use of the terms Black, African-American, and Negro can be spun in some way as positive. But is that so for the word Nigger? Before college my impression of the word was like saying “oh my God” in church. You just don’t say it. It is rude, offensive and racist. In college, I developed a new way of looking at what I used to know as the “N-word.” I discovered that some people in the Black community find it extremely offensive, while others, especially my closest friends, use it like any other word in a positive context. For example, someone might say “Nigga, please” instead of “Girl,

please.” As long as it is not meant to be offensive it is seen as ok. I saw this same concept present with my White girlfriends, who would say, “Bitch, please.” By a broad social definition these words are offensive, but in various groups of friends in my generation there seems to be an attempt to redefine the words. The use of the word “nigga” and “Nigger,” is seen differently. My friends say White people developed and used the word Nigger as a display of dominance in an attempt to make Black people feel insignificant. This is one of the reasons why it is so offensive for someone who is White to use the word. To my generation, Nigga is a friendlier term than Nigger and is used as a form of comradery. People who are Black are seen to have automatic license to say it, whereas people who are White or Brown don’t have a right because they generally don’t have the Black experience (Kennedy 92). It is seen as a privilege. Older generations of Black people often view Nigger and nigga as negative and derogatory no matter who says it.

Nigger comes from the Northern English word “neger,” which was derived from the Spanish word for black, “negro.” No one really knows how it became a slur but it started to gain familiarity as an insult in the early 1800s. The purpose of the word was not to separate people into classes but rather to belittle them (Kennedy 87). White parents would use the word to discipline their children, saying that they were “as ignorant as a Nigger,” or that they would have to “sit with the Niggers,” which was a place of shame. Over the years it has been adapted to fit other non-White races by coined terms like “sand Nigger” and “timber Nigger” referring to people of Arab or Native American decent, respectively (Kennedy 88). Throughout history Nigger has been seen as the trump card of racial insults. Between the years of 1989 and 1999 court plaintiffs



reported 20 instances of the use of “honky,” a negative term for White people. In the same time period “wetbacks” was reported 36 times, “chink” or “gook” 17 times, and “kike” 5 times. Nigger was reported several hundred times. The word is powerful and represents “all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America (Kennedy 88).” But behind closed doors authors, like journalist Roi Ottley and writer Clarence Major, have said that Black people use the word freely when out of earshot of White people. This indicates that when White people use Nigger to address a Black person it denotes offense, while when a Black person says it to a fellow Black person it is out of good will, reflecting one’s awareness of Black history. Author Geneva Smitherman states that there are four different meanings to Nigger. The first refers to identifying a group of Black people or African-Americans in a general way. The second is to disapprove of a person’s actions. The third is identifying and sharing values and experience of Black people as a whole. And lastly, it can be a term of endearment, like “friend.” Over the years many people, like Bill Cosby and E.R. Shipp, have attempted to discourage the use of the word in general, whether used positively or negatively (Kennedy 89). Ultimately, the use of the word has increased as hip-hop has become more popular, just as queer and dyke have become popular positive terms for the gay community. The term is used as a stance of “triumphant defiance (Kennedy 90).” There is controversy when it comes to who says the word though. White people often disapprove of and reject the idea that Nigger can be used in a positive light. This can be detrimental to the use of the word in terms of confidence and cultural pride (Kennedy 92).

At the beginning of college I thought that White was an invisible culture. As time has gone on I have discovered that White is privilege. It is a set of “unearned assets,

which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious (McIntosh 173)." During my first meeting for the Black Student Association I stood up and said, "I don't see color, I see culture." But even then that does not mean that such stereotypes, as Black people liking fried chicken, apply to ALL Black people. It applies to me. I love fried chicken!" There were people who rolled their eyes at me and said that I didn't understand. In the sense of not seeing color, I was ignorant. We all see the color of someone else's skin and no matter what anyone says, we all develop our own stereotypes within the context of our own lives. I often saw being White as ignorant, closed minded, judgmental, and fake. I saw being Black as open-minded, strong willed, and confident. My perceptions were actually stereotypes that I had developed from my own experiences. I saw White privilege and a generalized strength of Black oppression in response to my own privilege without knowing it. I did not see myself as the oppressor until I realized that my skin color and the culture I live in will be present no matter what I say or do. I am a part of the dominant culture by default of my skin color. I can work to eliminate my own prejudices, but I cannot solve the disproportionate privilege that weighs on society as a whole. In the words of Peggy McIntosh, "to redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool here (McIntosh 176)."

### *Predominantly Black Organizations at Predominantly White Institutions*

I have been involved in organizations since I was little. My first experience with organizations began with dance. I was always the odd ball who couldn't keep up with

the beat and I could never be fully in first position. T-ball followed along with cheerleading and then basketball, track and volleyball. I was in student government and National Honors Society in high school. In college, the first organization I joined was a service fraternity. I had never done community service before but I knew that I liked helping people so it seemed logical to give it a shot. When I did, I fell in love with doing service. I could have easily taken a different road to be involved in service. At BSU there is Student Voluntary Services and a service sorority called Epsilon Sigma Alpha. White students dominate both organizations. Alpha Phi Omega, the co-ed service fraternity I joined, is primarily made up of African-Americans. When I first joined, there were 15 people in the organization and I was the only White person. As time passed, my relationships with my brothers helped me to grasp an understanding of what race meant at our University. It meant that everyday my friends walked into their classrooms to be one of the few Black individuals present. It meant that they would experience pressure to overcome stereotypical ideas such as becoming a dropout or being classified as an underachiever. At a fraternity retreat we played a game called Cross The Line, where one person would make a statement and whoever agrees with the statement would step over a line on the floor. One particular statement has stuck with me: Cross the line if you have ever felt ashamed because of the color of your skin. At that moment I realized that I was ashamed of the color of my skin. It gave me a step up and ahead of my peers. It meant that I could blend into the sea of White in class, that I more than likely grew up in better neighborhoods and that I would not be judged by hiring companies for the color of my skin. This realization happened in my sophomore



year of college. As my college education progressed so did my view of the color of my skin.

I enjoyed my time with Alpha Phi Omega, but I wanted to join a sisterhood: a place where I could identify with other women who were trying to make a difference in the world. When I started looking at the various sororities on campus, I was more aware than most people about African-American sororities. I compared predominantly White sororities with African-American sororities and found that I was more attracted to the African-American sororities. It could be because, at that point, all of my closest friends were Black. At the same time, I had a deep respect for the Black culture. I had a deep desire to not only learn more, but also to live within the culture that I revered so much. I found that I liked the familial aspect that my friends seemed to have. They are all really close to at least a couple members of their family, if not all of them. In addition, I loved the fact that being skinny was not something that was admired as much as it was in the White culture. I don't feel conscious of my weight as much because in the Black culture it is ok to have a bigger butt or to have fat on your body. Another attractive element is the rich cultural history of Africans and Black people in America. Being of European descent, I am truly a mutt. I know that I am Hungarian, French, Irish, German, and English, but I don't know hardly anything about my own lineage and I am not aware of any traditions that have been passed down. I don't feel as if I have a culture or history of my own because it doesn't seem to matter to anyone else.

At Ball State University, Greeks constitute 10% of the population, approximately 1,700 members. For five consecutive years, the GPA of Greeks has been higher than the Ball State average. There are four councils for Greek Life at BSU. These include:

Interfraternal Council (IFC), Multicultural Greek Council (MGC), National Panhellenic Council (NPHC), and Panhellenic Council (PHC) (Ball State University). Each council has a specific set of sororities and fraternities that they cater to on campus. Although there are currently no exclusionary structures within Greek organizations today, "the color line still persists (Hughey 61)." Ball State University does not have all of the fraternities and sororities that take part in the national councils. IFC is made up of 13 primarily White fraternities. PHC is made up of 10 primarily White sororities. MGC has one Latino fraternity and one Latino sorority. NPHC consists of four sororities and two fraternities (Ball State University). On a national scale there are nine NPHC organizations, more commonly known as the "Divine Nine." It is important to note that NPHC organizations are historically African-American fraternities and sororities. These organizations developed out of a need to create a culture of education, philanthropy, self-improvement, and excellence within and beyond the African-American community. In summary, their purpose can be boiled down to this quotation from Lawrence C. Ross, Jr., "It is the collective realization that the unit is stronger than the individual, but that the achievements of the individual greatly enriches the unit (Ross XVI)." It was this element and a few others that drew me to choose NPHC over PHC organizations.

First, I knew the sororities in each council were viewed in differing lights. My own prejudice viewpoint led me to believe that White sororities seemed superficial with limited commitment beyond graduation. It seemed as if quantity, instead of quality, was their aim in obtaining membership. When conducting research, I found that White sorority members are more likely to join a sorority if they are looking to "get a man." White sorority members view their roles in their sorority mostly as limited to their college



years, although graduate chapters are present across the nation (Hughey 63). One study showed that the majority of Black Greeks come from lower socio-economic status, “are more academically motivated, more liberal, more socially conscious, and more peer independent than White Greeks (Hughey 63).” In addition, Black sorority members appear to be more focused on community service and their career, than “getting a man.” This is reflected by the amount of community service hours, which are five times higher for Black Greeks than White Greeks. Lastly, Black sorority members view their membership as a lifelong commitment, rather than a short-term college based one (Hughey 64).

As a White woman I was debating whether or not I would fit into the Black sorority and if it was appropriate to seek out the opportunity for membership. In the end, I felt that it was in my best interest to seek to join Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. because the mission and values of the organization amplified my own beliefs. I found that cross-racial Greek memberships have both disadvantages and advantages. More specifically, being a statistical minority in an organization creates a sense of racial tokenism and the organization is accredited with having “multicultural capital (Hughey 56).”

### *Tokenism in Black Greek Letter Organizations*

Tokenism is when one person or thing stands out from the rest of the group. Tokens are more visible and capture a “larger awareness share.” This means that when a small number of people belong to one social group, they will gain more attention from the larger group as their numbers decrease. In other words, attention and numerical

representation are inversely related (Kanter 210). I particularly notice this visibility in the classroom as well as in the organizations that I am a member of. This is common among many of my Black friends when they walk into a classroom. They are the only, or one of a few, Black person in the classroom and immediately draw attention. I feel the same way when I walk into a room of my sorority sisters. I look different, making me the token White woman at many events and meetings.

Tokens also highlight and exaggerate differences between the dominant and token group. In a group that has a common culture, like the Black sorority community, differences are implicit and often unnoticed. When there are a few people who do not fit into the particular set of social characteristics, the group becomes more aware of the differences between the two types of people. Furthermore, the differences between the two types of people are exaggerated. After I joined my sorority, I realized that I grew up watching different TV shows and movies that reflected the difference in values and beliefs. I was encouraged to watch shows such as "A Different World," "Family Matters," and "Living Single," which depicted different aspects of Black culture. I also watched what were considered to be Black movies like "Soul Food," "The Wood," and "School Daze." My sorority sisters, lovingly called sorors, watched the shows with me, explaining various cultural norms and differences between families and social classes. They attempted to help me understand that there are differences in how we were raised but it didn't change that we were in the same sorority and working toward that same goals of creating a sisterhood based on scholarship and service. Through these entertainment mediums I saw that stereotypes of Black culture were being revealed in order for me to better understand how the social constructs within the Black community work.

No matter how long I have been integrated in the Black community, there are stereotypes that people automatically have when I walk into a room being the only White woman. The contrast between differing cultures is recognized and generalizations are made about the token because they are different. This creates a skewed view of what values or beliefs that token might actually have, and assigns stereotypes in reference to the token's race (Kanter 211). When joining a Black sorority there are often times a New Initiate Presentation (NIP), or coming out show, to display the hard work of those who desire to seek admission into the sorority. My father attended my NIP and was the only White male at the show. After the performance was over, many of my friends said that they had guessed that he was my father and asked me questions about how my father felt about the performance. They asked if he knew what was happening, what it took for me to join, and how being a part of this sorority was different from others. My father's presence and his possible lack of knowledge were over-emphasized. They were assuming that my father was ignorant of Black practices and beliefs. It is not surprising that the only person who approached my father was my best friend, who had met him on multiple occasions. This demonstrates that even more open-minded college students apply stereotypes and tokenism to strangers.

A wonderful example of tokenism in my life was the hundred year Reenactment of the Suffrage March. The first event that my sorority participated in when we were founded in 1913 was the women's suffrage march in March of that year. This year is the one hundred year mark of our sorority as well as the march, so our national headquarters arranged the reenactment along with several other women's organizations. I was lucky enough to attend this event in Washington D.C. About 80



women from Indiana went to DC on two Greyhound buses. At the second stop when I was getting back on the bus a soror asked me if I was a Delta. It made me laugh because everyone on the bus was a member of the sorority, but because I am White my right to be on the bus was questioned. It was not questioned in a negative way, but there are not many White women in our sorority in Indiana. Approximately fifteen to twenty thousand people showed up to the march, consisting of mostly women in my sorority. As we walked through the streets I came to realize that I was one of about three White women I had seen that were a part of Delta Sigma Theta at the march. I received some stares, but mostly smiles. At the end of the march a soror came up to me and asked if she could take a picture with me. She was so excited saying, "I love meeting sorors from different backgrounds!" Once again, I did not take offense but rather took the chance to show that I earned my letters just as much as someone else who has a different skin color. In many ways, I have felt that being a token makes me the representative for my entire race within the context of Black Greek letter organizations.

### *Race Across the Borders*

The fall of my senior year at Ball State University was spent in Accra, Ghana. An English speaking country in West Africa, it is known around the world for the historic involvement in slave trade as well as being the first independent nation after the rise of colonialism. My experience in Ghana opened my eyes to how other nations have differentiating concepts of race. I struggled in Ghana with being White in some ways. I was approached on a regular basis because people thought that I had money. I was

White and more than likely American so how could I not have money? Many people didn't understand that I had to take out loans to study in Ghana, that I was borrowing money so that I could be there. They assumed that because I had modern clothing that wasn't torn, that I was rich. They asked me if I could get them a visa to America, or in the case of males, if I could marry them so they could go to America. Being White is not necessarily admired; it is the wealth and opportunity. Black Americans who go to Ghana experience the same things that I did but do not stick out as much as White Americans.

From an outsider's perspective, I could almost guess if someone was from a different nation by the shade of her or his skin. A lot of times people who were of a lighter complexion were from Ivory Coast or Togo. They had thinner noses and faces, and spoke French. I could separate native Africans from Lebanese. There is a high population of Lebanese people in Ghana who run many construction projects and corporate businesses, such as grocery stores. The relationship between Ghanaians and Lebanese is mostly business. It was rare for me to see the two groups hanging out as friends. I saw Ghanaian women with Lebanese men, which clearly seemed to me to be a sexual relationship. My roommate and I became friends with a small group of Lebanese guys for a short period of time. They were managing construction projects in Ghana. They felt that Ghanaian workers were lazy and did not work hard. I also got the impression that they thought that Ghanaians were not good enough to hang out with them, but we were good enough.

Although I encountered racial issues, I encountered more gender bias. It was not the same gender bias that I encountered in the United States, but rather more blatant cultural differences that led to an appreciation of my own culture. More specifically, I

was burdened the most by the constant attention as a woman and lack of respect for my body. Every day men who said I was beautiful and that they loved me approached me. Besides the fact that I was American, many men saw me as something to woo over and win. It was explained to me that Ghanaian women ignore men until they truly prove themselves to be devoted. One trick that many men have learned is to say "I love you" right off the bat. It was annoying to me but I was still extremely nice and said that I had a boyfriend back home. That did not help one bit. Because I was nice, men kept on pushing until I could find a way to get away from them. Ghanaian culture in general does not account for what we Americans call personal space. Strangers will touch or hug you in an instant, especially men when they want to get your attention. Many men would grab my arm and hold on. They would try to make sure that I was paying attention to them, wanting affirmation and flirtation. As I said before, I was nice in the beginning. Eventually I became frustrated and then angry by the men who were approaching me. I finally came to the conclusion that I needed to be firm and tell them that I did not like them invading my space. All of my American friends laughed at me, but were supportive, when I started to make a habit of saying "that's not acceptable in MY culture" whenever someone grabbed me. Ultimately, Ghanaian culture views women as providers for the home. They are oftentimes expected to be silent and to obey the male figure of the house, even if it is her son. Women in Ghana have been changing their own image throughout the years, but the weight of misogyny still burdens them. It is this weight that makes me grateful for my own culture and country. The United States has its own struggles such as unequal pay, sexual harassment and more



men than women in managerial positions. But that is our fight. Women in Ghana have to fight to survive, while we fight to thrive.

### *Conclusion*

At the start of college my family, friends and the communities that I lived in shaped who I was. My friendships when I was growing up on the east coast, parents' values, and moving to the mid-west led me to value diversity in the world. In college, I began to gain a sense of my true identity via the exploration of diversity, specifically race and ethnicity. My outgoing personality and willingness to wade into new territory led me to my experiences in the Black community at Ball State University and beyond. I have had the opportunity to participate in discussions involving race and identity with some of my closest friends. I have become a part of an African-American sorority that not only holds my values, but also a deep devotion to improving the lives of women around the world, whether that touches on race, gender, or poverty. All of my experiences have shaped the person I am today. They have equipped me with the skills and knowledge to explore, learn, and thrive no matter where I end up. I am proud to say that if I could choose to relive college, I would make the same choices that led me to be the strong, confident and determined woman that I am today.

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